

‘Hey! Hey! I've seen this one, I've seen this one. It's a classic’: Nostalgia, repeat viewing and cult performance in *Back to the Future*¹

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Abstract:

This article examines the enduring popularity of *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985) and its status as an emergent cult blockbuster for a new generation of fans. It draws on the findings of a small-scale audience survey conducted at a one-off screening of the film at Aberystwyth Arts Centre in early February 2012, where it was part of the University's cult film club programme. The responses to the survey are contextualised by examples of fan practices found online; these indicate some of the additional ways in which a continued affection for *Back to the Future* is expressed by its followers. From these sources, two audience-led approaches are developed as a means to investigate on-going fandom of *Back to the Future*. The first of these is an exploration of the nature and value of fan nostalgia expressed towards *Back to the Future* and other “classic” popular culture texts of the eighties.² This includes an examination of the kinds of nostalgia that are articulated by fans towards films that were released before they were born, and takes Barbara Klinger's work on the practice of re-watching films as a starting point (2006). The second approach considers the popular acting partnership of Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd, and draws on the emergent academic study of cult stardom and performance (Mathijs and Sexton 2011; Egan and Thomas 2013). Through an exploration of these two audience-led approaches, I consider whether it is possible to observe an on-going process of cultification in relation to the *Back to the Future* franchise in a number of significant ways.³

Keywords: Audience research, cult blockbuster, fan cultures and practices, nostalgia, repeat viewings, cult performance.

Introduction: ‘I need your help to get back to the year 1985’⁴

Previous academic discussions of *Back to the Future* have formed three distinct areas of analysis. Firstly, there has been a consideration of the historical context of the film, as an

example of Reaganite nostalgia for the conservative culture and values of fifties America (Prince 1999: 219; Sobchack 2004: 78-87).⁵ Secondly, an exploration of the film in relation to authorship debates has developed, focusing on Zemeckis' thematic and stylistic concerns in the light of his position as a Spielberg protégé (Prince 2007: 1-21; Shail and Stoate 2010: 17-23). Thirdly, there have been textual readings of the film's oedipal storyline, exploring the relationship between the teenage protagonist, Marty McFly, and his mother, Lorraine Baines, in her fifties teenage incarnation (Gordon 1987; Wittenberg 2006). In contrast to these existing studies of the film, this article opens up two alternative analyses of *Back to the Future* which have emerged from the findings of a small-scale audience survey. The first of these considers the question of nostalgia and focuses on the cultural value of *Back to the Future* accrued through its appropriation by younger audiences as a "classic" eighties text. Barbara Klinger argues that engaging in re-viewings of favourite films provides a rich and rewarding personal experience for the participant (2006). Her investigation into the practice of re-viewing films amongst students at Indiana University reveals that 'far from compulsively and mindlessly pursuing repetition for its own sake, youths in the survey approached their favourite titles with different agendas and desires' (Klinger 2006: 151).

This article therefore sets out to identify the different agendas and desires of the Aberystwyth audience, and to consider the broader implications these have. The second approach focuses on the much-loved performances by Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd. In particular, it investigates whether or not it is possible to identify an alternative appreciation of 'hammy, self-conscious' cult performance styles that are 'related to the notion of *excess*,' (Mathijs and Sexton: 84) amongst the participants' responses to *Back to the Future*, and whether this alternative form of appreciation can be construed to reflect a cult fan sensibility.

While this investigation uses the findings of a small-scale survey as its starting-point, they are not intended to function as a representative sample of audiences for the *Back to the Future* in general. The project was conceived as a means to explore some of the reasons for the film's continuing popularity with contemporary audiences by examining a snapshot of responses to a specific screening of the film. *Back to the Future* was also the first film that I watched more than once at the cinema, in 1985; despite its ubiquitous presence on UK television schedules in the intervening years, I have rarely re-visited it. In the weeks preceding the screening of the film at Aberystwyth Arts Centre I became increasingly excited about watching *Back to the Future* again on the big screen and this, in part, triggered my decision to conduct this survey. A brief schedule of questions was put together (see Appendix One) with the intention of uncovering how many members of the audience were also re-watching the film and, of those who were, what it was that drew them to see the film again. *Back to the Future* attracted the largest audience of all the films included in the cult film club programme of the year in which it was screened; over 150 tickets were sold and the cinema was packed out.⁶ However, while the initial research question I was investigating was why the film was still so popular with contemporary audiences, the

context of the screening naturally led into a broader consideration of whether or not *Back to the Future* can legitimately be considered a cult blockbuster.

Cult concerns: audience, text and the ‘middle ground’

The academic study of cult cinema has been characterised by discussions of its unstable and complex character (for examples, see Church et al: 2008; Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 1-9). Early studies of cult cinema often explore either textual analyses of cult films (Eco 1995; Grant 2000) or adopt audience-based approaches to understanding the category (Jancovich 2002; Hollows 2003). These audience and reception-led approaches to cult frequently draw on Bourdieu (1984) to interpret the prestige of cult status as a bid for anti-mainstream, subcultural distinction. However, more recently there has been a move towards a ‘middle ground’ that acknowledges the significance of specialised or unusual cult receptions whilst also emphasising the complexities of audience engagement with the textual qualities of cult films (Mathijs and Sexton 2011; Hills 2011).⁷ This ‘middle ground’ considers user-orientated accounts of cult without downplaying the provisional and diverse nature of relations between text and audience, or overlooking broader thematic, aesthetic or industry-related concerns. Although this study ostensibly falls into the ‘audience-based’ camp, in that its starting point is an audience survey, the research findings guide the investigation in a more textually-orientated direction, to consider aspects of performance and ‘retro-aesthetics’. In this way, I combine user-orientated accounts of cult as a viewing strategy with a consideration of specific textual attributes of *Back to the Future* as a means to examine the multiple reasons for the film’s continued popularity.

This article also addresses one specific dimension of the debates circulating around the cult category, the cultification of popular or “mainstream” films, by considering *Back to the Future* as a possible example.⁸ Mathijs and Sexton suggest that the consumption of nostalgic films from the eighties (portraying the fifties) indicates a cultic sensibility linked to ‘the 1980s mode of “recycled culture”’ (2011: 186). However, the inclusion of blockbuster films, such as *Back to the Future*, within the category of cult cinema remains a contentious one that often divides the academic community.⁹ This is partly due to the way in which cult films have frequently been positioned as niche interests within film culture as a whole; those with cultic interests are understood to express their devotion to these films as being antithetical to mainstream cinema (Jancovich 2002; Hollows 2003). The ritual hostility expressed towards Hollywood films by some cult film fans has sometimes resulted in a marked reluctance amongst film academics to acknowledge the possibility that fan activities surrounding certain mainstream films can develop cultic qualities. However, Matt Hills, Nathan Hunt and others have explored a range of cult fan audiences that have evolved in relation to mainstream films such as *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Hills 2005a, 2006; Hunt 2003). Hills argues that the notion of the cult blockbuster should not be conceived as an oddity and that the cult status of a mainstream film can develop through a variety of cult readings of a particular text. He suggests that, in the case of *The Lord of the*

Rings trilogy, a number of specialised cult audiences have formed (such as Peter Jackson fans, Tolkienites and special effects connoisseurs) and concludes that 'this makes the cult blockbuster less of a surprise, perhaps, and more of a plural, nuanced, *residual and emergent* cult(ural) phenomenon, one which calls for case-by-case consideration rather than blanket derision or celebration' (Hills 2006: 169). In the light of this argument, the findings of this small survey are framed by a consideration of the extent to which the Aberystwyth audience responses to *Back to the Future* upset traditional viewing strategies and illustrate several ways in which fans derive cultist pleasures from the film.

A brief profile of the Aberystwyth audience

The questionnaire was completed by 102 members of the audience attending the screening of *Back to the Future* in Aberystwyth. The wider context in which the film was screened clearly has some bearing on audience responses to it. The programme of screenings for the cult film club was developed with the intention of providing an opportunity for undergraduate students at Aberystwyth University to encounter a broader range of films than those they regularly came across in the course of their formal studies. This meant that a relatively high percentage of film students attended the programme of films which *Back to the Future* belonged to. Nevertheless, these screenings were also open to members of the general public. These factors clearly impact on the shared culture of the audience and the significance the text has for them. Although this survey does not attempt to provide a detailed portrait of the tastes and preferences of the audience members, it acknowledges that, as Sarah Thornton argues, youth audiences often 'seek out and accumulate cultural goods for strategic use within their own social worlds' (Thornton 1995: 7-8). The cultural framework for viewing the film was further shaped by the introduction to the text provided by one of the members of the cult film club.¹⁰ This focused primarily on highlighting the generic elements of the film (as part science-fiction, part teen movie, part blockbuster), on the star persona of Michael J. Fox, and on the postmodernist, self-referential qualities of the *Back to the Future* trilogy as a whole. In drawing attention to parodies of the 'Johnny B. Goode' scene from the film, seen on recent episodes of *Family Guy* (2007) and *The Simpsons* (2008), the introduction also functioned to highlight the subcultural capital of the film for fans of popular culture from the eighties. This perceived subcultural cache, established through the pop culture references, was mentioned by several participants in their questionnaire responses. Screening the film within this discursive context, therefore, partially shaped the research findings; it facilitated an environment in which the participants were more likely to display their cultural competencies to fellow members of their subculture, in order to establish they were 'in the know' (Thornton 1995: 11). However, this discursive framework is understood as constituting *one possible* influence on audience observations, rather than a factor determining *all* of the participants' responses.

Survey findings: contextual information

Although not representative, the information that the research participants provide is significant in indicating the kind of pleasures a particular type of audience associates with watching this film. *Back to the Future* is not a film that appears to attract a gendered audience, in Aberystwyth at least. This data also echoes the results of Klinger's research which suggests that, unlike many genre films, comedies (as she classified *Back to the Future*) draw both male and female students alike. It is the most popular category of film 'not only because of the opportunity to revisit the laughs, but also because the films fit particularly well into peer settings.' This is due, Klinger suggests, to the social ease engendered by their humorous content (2006: 149).¹¹ 19.8% of respondents to the Aberystwyth questionnaire affirmed that the main reason they were at the screening was because they were 'with friends' or were there for 'social reasons', thus reinforcing the sense that this film is used for social bonding purposes amongst younger audiences. In terms of the film's star attractions, the combination of what one respondent described as the 'amazing' performance of Michael J. Fox in the charismatic lead role, and Lea Thompson as his teenage mother, further broadens the popular, cross-gender appeal of the film. One respondent cited 'humour and the hottie who plays his mum' (participant #79) as being two of the key reasons to watch the film again. However, the pairing that attracted more comments from the research participants was that of Marty McFly and Doc Brown; this will be discussed in further detail below, in the analysis of answers to Question Four.

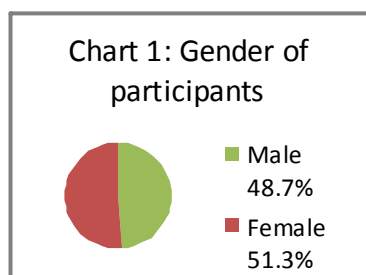


Fig. 1: Responses to Question (a)

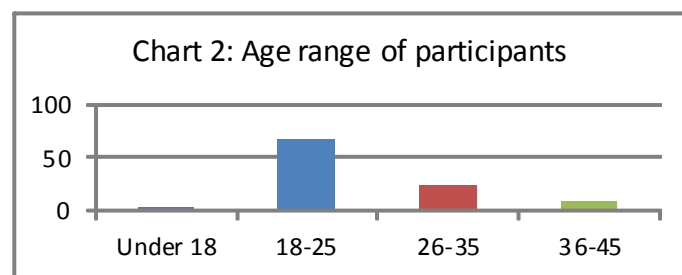


Fig. 2: Responses to Question (b) (see Appendix One)

The age range of the Aberystwyth respondents was atypical for a film audience at the Arts Centre, and primarily reflects the large population of undergraduate students who frequently attend cult film club screenings at the cinema, which is located on the university campus.¹² Although the questionnaire provided three different age categories for participants over forty-five, none of the responses came from these particular age groups; the majority of participants were aged 18-35 (89.5%). This again echoes the findings of Klinger's research which revealed that the current generation of American students (circa 2006) tends to gravitate towards re-viewing Hollywood films from the eighties and nineties. In this context it is interesting to note that *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985), another film released in the same year that was also screened as part of the cult film programme, attracted a significantly older audience profile than *Back to the Future*. One of the first

questions arising from this data, then, is why are so many young people drawn specifically to watching (and re-watching) *Back to the Future*?

The different ways in which the research respondents orientated themselves towards the film is also significant. 42.1% of those who filled out the questionnaire classified themselves primarily as being *Back to the Future* fans – a figure far higher than the 10% who categorised themselves, first and foremost, as cinephiles with an interest in cult cinema. The second most popular option amongst respondents highlighted their general nostalgia for films from the eighties. These findings are important in the light of the film student profile of the audience discussed above; although many members of the audience were film students, and regularly attended the cult film club screenings, in this instance their identity as fans takes precedence over their status as cinephiles. *Back to the Future* is, therefore, clearly a film that attracts a devoted and passionate group of followers amongst its more recent recruits; 62.5% of those who identified themselves to be fans were aged 18-25.

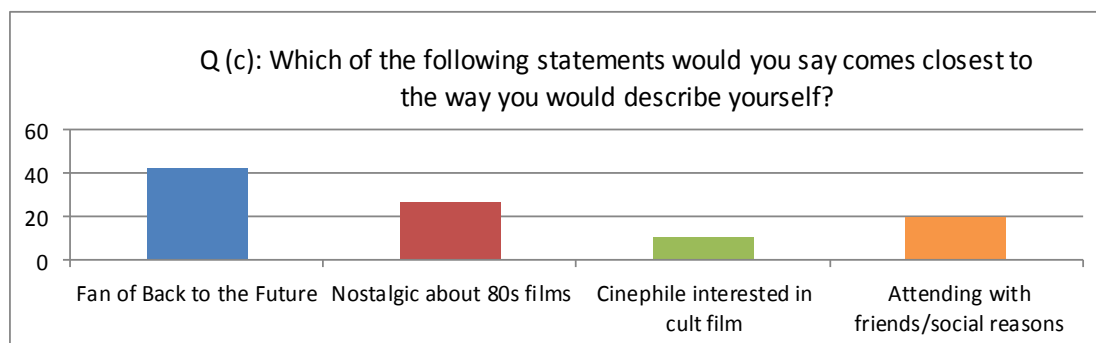


Fig. 3: Responses to Question (c) (see Appendix One)

The research participants expressed their fandom in a number of ways. Several respondents included details in their questionnaire responses about special screenings of the film they had attended at Universal Studios, or at the V Festival in Weston Park. These additional notes reflect a pattern of social behaviour within fan communities that aims to establish the status of the fan through their memories of attending conventions or other special events. The longevity of their fandom also plays a significant part in this discourse; memories of watching the film in their own distant past serve to reinforce the length of time they have been devoted to the film.

The eagerness amongst the research participants to be identified as fans could also be connected to the subcultural capital the film carries with younger audiences. The word 'classic' is used to describe the film by 11.2% of respondents, and 25.9% use the term 'awesome' in at least one of the answers they provide. Some academics have linked the subcultural capital of the film to its frequent pop culture references, such as George's line 'Last night, Darth Vader came down from Planet Vulcan and told me that if I didn't take Lorraine out, that he'd melt my brain'. This scene is regularly referenced in *Back to the Future* Internet tributes such as '52 reasons why *Back to the Future* might just be the Greatest Movie of All Time' (Bunkham 2011). One of the research respondents identifies the

Darth Vader scene as his favourite, describing ‘the bit where Marty dresses up as Darth Vader and plays a Van Halen tape via headphones to wake George. This bit introduced me to a style of music with which I was unacquainted yet instantly liked... a lot! The Darth Vader impersonation was also amusing’ (participant #76). The pleasure associated with identifying intertextual references within the *Back to the Future* is clearly significant for some of the respondents and could be indicative of what Matt Hills has termed ‘intertextual subcultural capital’ (Hills 2005: 166-197); there is a range of intertextual references made throughout *Back to the Future* that could facilitate the pleasure of reference-spotting, although none are further mentioned in the questionnaire responses. The use of music provides another aspect of the pop culture appeal that *Back to the Future* carries. References to both the eighties soundtrack and also to the popular music of the fifties included within the film are mentioned by 32.6% of research participants. These connections between the film and popular music also take on more obscure forms. On several fan websites the tribute songs performed by actor Thomas F. Wilson (Biff Tannen) are discussed as features that establish the film’s cult reputation amongst the fan community.

A second key finding, in terms of how research participants orientate themselves towards the film, is that 23.6% of respondents said they were watching the film as part of a general interest in eighties nostalgia. 60% of these respondents were aged 18-25, a finding which raises some interesting questions about the nature of nostalgia and how it functions in relation to *Back to the Future*; this will be discussed further below, in relation to the Question Four.

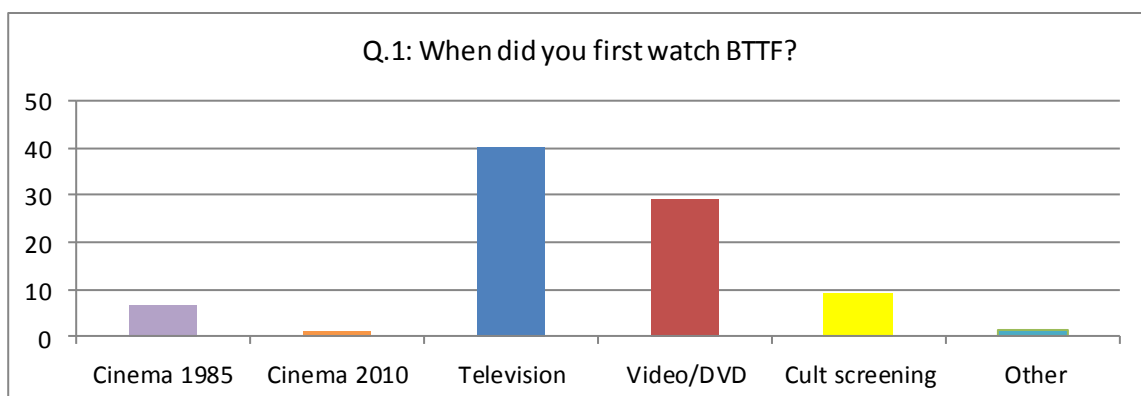


Fig. 4: Responses to Question One (see Appendix One)

Only a very small minority (7.9%) of this predominantly young, fan-orientated audience first saw the film at the cinema (it was re-released in 2010, so there was reasonable opportunity for this to have been the case). The majority of respondents were introduced to the film on television or video, and had already seen it prior to the 2010 re-release. The context of home viewing is significant for several reasons. Klinger argues that ‘like other objects, films experienced repeatedly in the home can attain an intimate, quasi-familial status that affects their meaning and influences individuals’ perceptions of themselves and the world’ (Klinger

2006: 139). She suggests that the ability to manipulate a film at home (by fast-forwarding, rewinding and selecting favourite sequences to re-watch) increases familiarity and enjoyment of the text. Similarly, Timothy Corrigan discusses the role of video in relation to cult status, arguing that as a film becomes the property of a fan's domestic space, they gain the ability to study and manipulate the text, transforming it into the 'physical fabric' of a beloved cult object (1991: 84). The original domestic viewing context in which most of the Aberystwyth audience first encountered *Back to the Future*, then, is highly significant and closely linked to the intense and personal relationship they have with the film. The survey also indicates that the pleasures of home-viewing are strongly connected to notions of nostalgia, which will be explored further below.

In general, the majority of the research participants involved in the Aberystwyth study do not fall into the category of high volume repeat viewers; only 26% have seen the film more than ten times. Those that do fall into this category are more likely to consider themselves to be fans of the film and to own it on DVD or on Blu-ray. This finding, concerning the frequency of repeat viewing, reinforces the notion that degree of fan investment in the film is not always associated with the regularity with which a film is re-viewed; there are other ways to recreate the pleasures of the films, which in the case of *Back to the Future* are often derived from what have been termed as ancillary materials (Barker 2004) or paratexts (Gray 2011) connected to the franchise. This culture can, again, be observed on the fan websites, which devote as much space to the discussion of memorabilia, merchandise, *Back to the Future* computer games, the Universal Studios ride and DeLorean rental deals as they do to the actual trilogy itself.¹³

To summarise the background information gathered through the survey, the Aberystwyth audience for *Back to the Future* is characterised by a predominantly young group of attendees (the majority being aged 18-35), who are inclined to position themselves as fans of the film, and who discovered the film on television or video during the late eighties or the nineties.

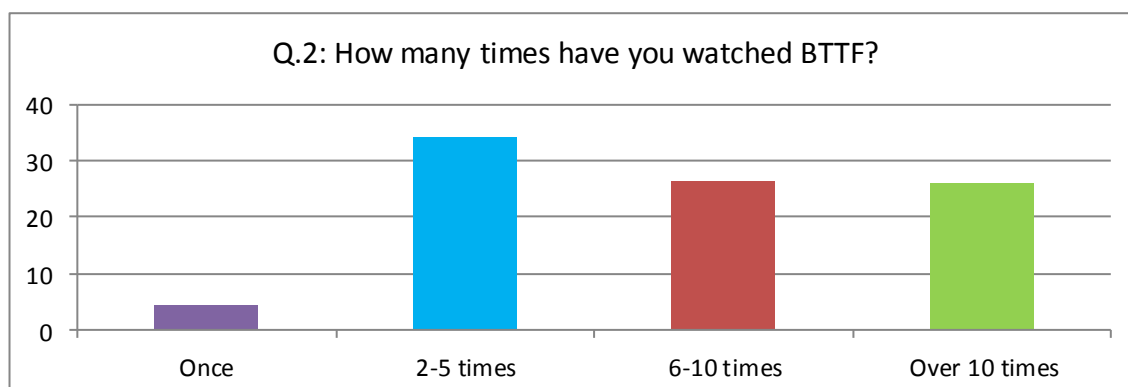


Fig. 5: Responses to Question Two (see Appendix One)

Cult fandom, nostalgia and the pleasure of 'retro aesthetics'

The research participants were asked to identify a memorable favourite sequence from the film, and to explain the reasons behind their choices. One of the significant characteristics about the ways in which this question is answered is the variety of different scenes that are discussed (the scenes that were only identified by one respondent have not been included in Fig. Six); in fact, several respondents pick out two or three favourite scenes, or note 'to be honest, all of the scenes are great' (participant #11). One participant explains that she cannot pick out one specific scene because they are all 'perfect,' and summarises the film's key strengths as 'it's funny, it's nostalgic and it has a perfect structure - a brilliant piece of writing. It doesn't flag at any point - beautifully paced' (participant #37). The ways in which the favourite scenes are discussed can be grouped together in three principle clusters: an appreciation of the dialogue used in these scenes; discussions surrounding the respondents' favourite characters; and the participants' enjoyment of the music and soundtrack used in their favourite scenes.

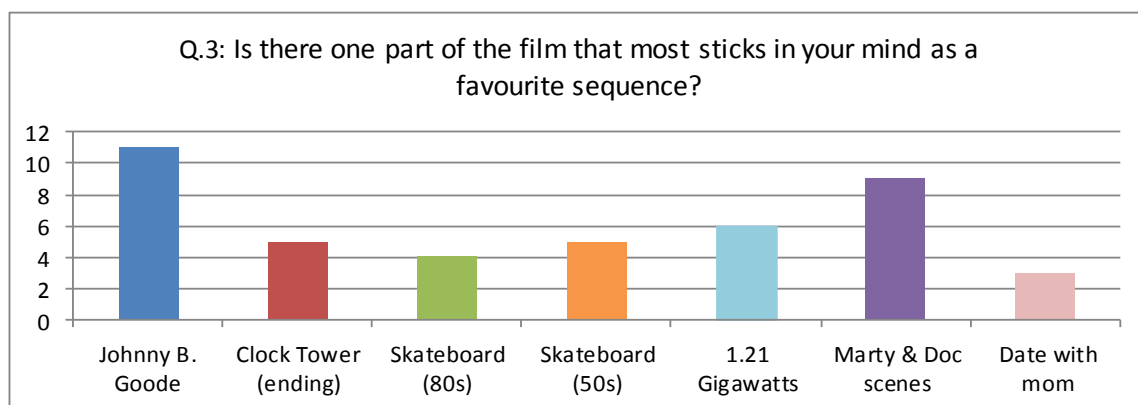


Fig. 6: Responses to Question Three (see Appendix One)

A first feature of the responses to this question is the number of references made by participants to dialogue from the film. These include 'Great Scott!', 'You made a time machine... out of a DeLorean?', 'Better get used to those bars, kid' and '1.21 gigawatts!' Quotability is a characteristic often associated with cult films. Klinger suggests that this aspect of 'karaoke cinema' provides the audience with a degree of comfort and mastery, and allows the movie to become like a familiar friend that can provide solace, particularly in unfamiliar situations. More specifically, Klinger argues that the practice of memorising lines of dialogue is often related to age and gender, 'since those participating in the ritual of memorization are often in their formative years, karaoke cinema functions at least partly to rehearse different types of masculinity deemed attractive by young men' (Klinger 2006: 184). While this may well be the case with some of the participants in Klinger's study, this finding was not born out with the audience for *Back to the Future* in Aberystwyth, as 43% of those who quoted lines from the films were female. For these participants, a sense of familiarity and mastery of the text, along with an appreciation of the 'stand out awesome

lines,' appear to be the key pleasures involved in quoting dialogue from the film. Although there have been relatively few surveys of cult fan cultures surrounding 'mainstream' films, within the context of these other studies the Aberystwyth audience is atypical in terms of its gender balance. Will Brooker's study of *Star Wars* fans (2002) attracted responses from only a minority of female fans, and similar audience studies have also echoed this pattern (Proctor 2013). Mathijs and Sexton suggest that there is 'a striking gender-uniformity' (2011: 221) amongst audiences for cult blockbusters, in that specific films attract gendered followings. It is difficult to offer any conclusive explanation for the differences demonstrated by the Aberystwyth audiences when dealing with such a small sample. However, it is possible that the method used to gather the questionnaires might have had some impact on the number of female participants involved in the survey. In Aberystwyth, the questionnaires were distributed and collected at the venue by female volunteers associated with the cult film club, whereas other studies have often relied on recruitment via fan websites. It is possible, then, that the method of requesting fans to take part in an online survey might produce significantly different results than a face-to-face encounter between the research participant and the team of researchers (who were partially familiar to the audience members).

A second significant pattern in the responses to Question Three is the frequent reference made to the characters of Marty and Doc. 24% of respondents specifically mention scenes involving both actors, such as 'all the bits with Doc and Marty - probably when Marty first meets him in 1955 and has to persuade him that he's from the future' (participant #5). Some answers simply throw both characters together as the key pleasurable elements of the film: 'When Marty blows up the amp - best opening sequence ever! [And] DOC. End of. He's a legend' (participant #98) or, more concisely, 'Just - MARTY MCFLY + DOC ♥' (participant #92). The focus in these answers is on the characters (rather than the actors, who are discussed more frequently in response to Question Four). Over 60% of the answers discuss the principal character of Marty McFly, often referencing his 'awesome' guitar playing or the skateboarding scenes. One of the very few older respondents who participated in the survey (aged 36-45) reflected that the film 'reminds me of being a young teenager - Marty was a cool dude (but not too cool) and not a dumbass jock. There was hope ...' (participant #76). This response echoes one of Klinger's key arguments that re-viewing films over a period of time provides viewers with 'a road map through their lives, autobiographical landmarks that represent points of orientation to the past as well as the present' (2006: 174-5). However, these types of response are not common in this particular small-scale survey; more consistent is the approach that locates the text as a "classic" and appreciates its subcultural value and position amongst other popular texts from the eighties.

The use of music in these scenes is also highlighted as a specific aspect of the pleasure experienced by Aberystwyth audiences, with many of the respondents specifically mentioning Huey Lewis & the News or Marty McFly's cover of *Johnny B. Goode*. One respondent identifies the eighties skateboarding scene as her favourite, 'the part near the

beginning where Marty is skitching his way to school (the song makes it!)’ (participant #48). Similarly, another participant identifies her favourite scene as ‘the dance scene where Lorraine kisses George. Reason: MUSIC!’ (participant #7). Another slightly longer response picks out the moment Marty first arrives in Hill Valley in the fifties, when ‘he walks in to town and *Mr Sandman* is playing, which just sets the whole mood of the scene. Everything is perfect, the clothing, the set ...I love the retro aesthetics of the film, I can watch it again and again and see new things each time’ (participant #55). The various ways in which some of these answers focus on the music complementing the action or mood of their favourite scenes echoes the findings of Lauren Anderson’s research, which investigates audience responses to the use of popular music in film soundtracks. Anderson notes of her focus group findings that ‘nearly everyone spoke at some point about music matching the mood within a scene, or the mood of a character, or as conveying a particular mood to the audience’ (2011: 14). A very small minority of replies also comment on other media texts that reference the scenes from the film. One participant suggests ‘the rock ‘n’ roll scene, at the dance, is easily the most memorable moment of the film, with Marty McFly ‘stunning’ the High School kids. It’s hard to say why, to be honest. It certainly doesn’t hurt that it has a high cultural cache (i.e. *Family Guy* parody)’ (participant #62).

The discussion of the music and soundtrack used in *Back to the Future* again points to a common characteristic in the way in which certain films gain a cultic appreciation. Mathijs and Sexton note that it is surprising how little academic attention has been paid to the relationship between music and cult cinema, when it clearly plays a prominent role in the way in which cult films are appreciated (2011: 172). This occurs not only with musicals, such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975) and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), but also with rock movies, such as *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979), and with films that produce cult soundtracks. Ian Conrich argues that cult films and musicals share a number of common characteristics such as ‘performances of extravagance and exuberance, obvious energy and ability, open emotions, fantasy and a sudden explosion of spectacle’ (Conrich 2006: 115). Given this, it is not therefore surprising that films which incorporate scenes of musical excess might develop a cult following. While the screening of *Back to the Future* in Aberystwyth did not witness any of the audience engaging in visible participatory rituals, the extravagant spectacle of the *Johnny B. Goode* sequence played a highly significant role in the audiences’ appreciation for the film. The responses to Question Three reveal, then, that certain performative aspects of ‘karaoke cinema’, such as quoting dialogue and the enjoyment of musical spectacle, are integral to the continuing popularity of *Back to the Future*; these pleasures could also be indicative of the film’s emergent cult status.

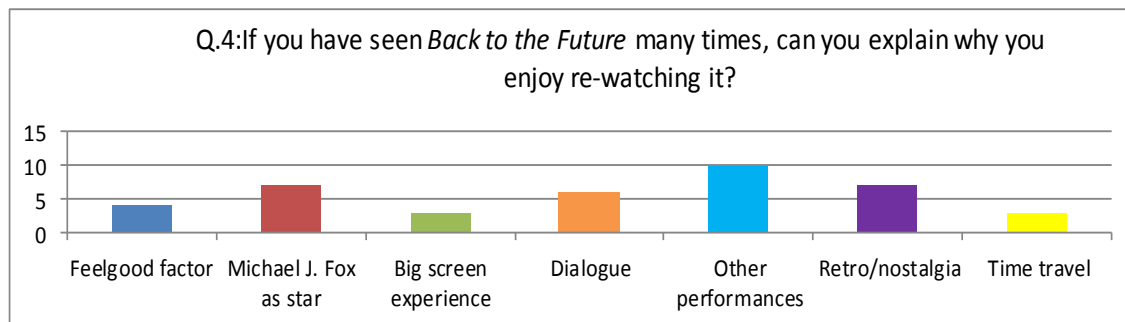


Fig. 7: Responses to Question Four (see Appendix One)

In the answers to Question Four several patterns emerge from the explanations provided by the Aberystwyth audience. The first of these emphasises retro culture and nostalgia, which has already been touched on in some of the previous answers. Even though the research participants are, for the most part, not old enough to remember the original release of *Back to the Future* in cinemas, an appreciation of nostalgia still plays a key part in their enjoyment. One respondent, aged 18-25, offers the comment ‘it’s an enjoyable film. It also helps that it’s an eighties film, the decade I was born, so it has lots of nostalgic value’ (participant #24). Another respondent in the same age category simply writes ‘Nostalgia. Reminds me of being young’ (participant #55). The research findings also reveal that 26.3% of respondents claim to have a general nostalgia for eighties films, even though 60% of this group of participants are aged 18-25 and so were born at the tail end of the decade. It could be argued that there is a peculiarity in referencing nostalgia as an aspect of pleasure taken in re-watching a film that was released before you were born; these comments therefore invite a closer examination of what precisely is being referred to as ‘nostalgia’ by the research participants.

Paul Grainge argues that nostalgia is a cultural style rather than, more straightforwardly, a form of longing for the past. In his discussion of the commodification of nostalgia in American culture since the seventies, Grainge proposes that nostalgia is a cultural style that

has emerged in a cultural moment able to access, circulate, and reconfigure the textual traces of the past in new and dynamic ways, that has taken up nostalgia in particular representational and taste regimes, and that has generally disjoined nostalgia from any specific meaning located in the past (Grainge 2000: 33).

Rather than implying a wistfulness, Grainge argues that the development of nostalgia as a cultural style reflects a new ability to re-view and renegotiate media texts that is specific to the late twentieth century. The comment made about the *Mr. Sandman* scene (by participant #55, see above) suggests that this might be the case for some members of the Aberystwyth audience. Mathijs and Sexton take this a step further and propose that films

from the eighties, such as *Back to the Future*, *Peggy Sue Got Married* and *Dirty Dancing*, signal the consumption of nostalgic films (portraying the Fifties) taking on a particularly cultic sensibility (2011: 186). However, in a separate analysis of *Back to the Future* Mathijs adopts a more traditional interpretation of nostalgia, arguing that it is symptomatic of the fact that 'audiences' yearning for a better future has given way to a yearning for a better past' (Mathijs in Mathijs and Sexton: 186). The implication here is that the nostalgic yearning on the part of film audiences can be understood in terms of a nostalgia expressed for the historical setting of the film, rather than an appreciation of nostalgia as a style. However, this interpretation of the pleasures associated with nostalgia is not illustrated by any of responses from the Aberystwyth audience, who are more likely to express an enjoyment of nostalgia as an aesthetic style (see participant #55, above).

Analyses of the current trend towards eighties nostalgia have focused on its popularity with thirty and forty year-olds (Cook 2005). However, for the generation of fans born in the eighties, the nostalgic value associated with *Back to the Future* appears to be linked to childhood memories of watching the film on television or video. Klinger discusses this particular agenda in relation to the role nostalgia plays with her research participants in Indiana. She points out that although nostalgia often tends to be associated with middle and old age, the very young also experience a high degree of longing and wistfulness about their childhood and early adolescence and proposes that 'perhaps more than other motivations, nostalgic impulses for re-viewing signal how individuals within a generation comprehend not only themselves and their peer group but also broader histories that define their social experience' (Klinger 2006: 175). The findings of Klinger's survey suggest that revisiting the popular culture of one's childhood is often part of a viewing strategy for re-experiencing a more carefree and less complicated period of their own personal history. This pattern of behaviour can be clearly observed with the Aberystwyth research participants. One respondent remembers 'I used to watch it with my mum and dad' (participant #61). Another explains that she likes to re-watch the film 'because it's amazing and reminds me of my childhood' (participant #4). Connected to this group of responses is the slightly different, but interrelated pleasure, of re-watching the film 'for the cinema experience! I wasn't born when it first came out' (participant #52). For those participants who were introduced to *Back to the Future* on the television, then, there is a significant degree of excitement, fuelled by nostalgia for their own childhood, about watching the film on the big screen for the first time. For others, it is an aesthetic pleasure taken in the textual recycling of fifties culture in an eighties context. These findings suggest that nostalgia constitutes both a pleasurable textual quality *and* a viewing strategy for the Aberystwyth audience of *Back to the Future*.

In sum, many of the responses to Questions Three and Four indicate that an enjoyment of the performative elements of *Back to the Future*, together with a nostalgic value linked to childhood memories of watching the film, explain the film's continuing popularity with the new generation of fans. In many ways these pleasures, together with an appreciation of the range of performances in the film (which will be discussed below) are

clearly intertwined; it is the combination of these key ingredients that, put together, appear to account for the loyal and ever-expanding fan base which the film attracts.

Friends in Time: the partnership of Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd

The range of performances found in *Back to the Future* provides one of the most highly referenced elements of pleasure the Aberystwyth audience derive from re-watching the film. The responses reference a number of actors: 'The time machine, the music, Michael J. Fox, Crispin Glover, Christopher Lloyd – a great yet simple story. Happy memories of childhood,' (participant #40). Crispin Glover (George McFly) is only mentioned by three respondents in this context, all of whom are aged over twenty-five - his performance is more frequently referenced on fan websites exploring the cult potential of the film, where he is identified as 'the man who is the very definition of the phrase 'cult actor' ... and went on to carve out a career filled with eclectic performances coupled with a plethora of off-screen eccentricities' (Bunkham 2011). More frequently, references made to the performance of Christopher Lloyd as Doc Emmett Brown are given as a key reason for re-watching *Back to the Future*. One respondent states that her favourite moment in the film is '1.21 Gigawatts! Doc Brown is awesome, I love his expressions... he makes me laugh every time I see it' (participant #101).

In their discussion of the possible factors defining a cult actor, Mathijs and Sexton consider the ways in which character actors cultivate alternative acting styles. They propose that, in opposition to the realistic performance styles that are so highly valued in mainstream cinema (such as the method acting technique favoured by many Hollywood stars), cult actors often consciously develop 'hammy' acting styles. In this way they represent a marginalised, alternative 'other' that can generate subcultural capital with cult film audiences (Mathijs and Sexton 2011: 83-85). This hammy, self-conscious style is clearly an element of Lloyd's performance that is picked up on by the Aberystwyth survey respondents, who display an appreciation of Doc's 'over-the-top responses... I love it when he says 'Great Scott'. Legend' (participant #12). Sarah Thomas further develops the idea that cult actors embody elements of difference and otherness in their performances, and identifies a number of significant ways in which this otherness is often achieved. Firstly, Thomas suggests, their marginal position in terms of their screen time means that character actors in subsidiary roles have to, in effect, 'steal the show'. This can lead to an excessive acting style, such as an overly dramatic use of props or exaggerated facial expressions and physical gestures. Although the Fox/Lloyd partnership is given more screen space in the sequels (most notably in the third part of the trilogy), in the original film Lloyd features in just a few of the scenes. However, these scenes are undoubtedly memorable, and key to their memorability is the acting partnership between Fox and Lloyd; this is clearly illustrated in the responses to Questions Three and Four discussed above. Another element of cult performances that Thomas identifies is the vocal delivery. In response to the adulative relationship between the camera and principal star, she argues that cult actors tend to

amplify their performance in other ways, often through the delivery of their lines. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Lloyd, whose distinctive raspy voice is used to great theatrical effect in his performance. Again, a number of survey responses reflect an enjoyment of Lloyd's vocal performance; his lines are quoted by 13.2% respondents (compared with 11.9% who reference Marty's dialogue). One participant identifies a favourite scene as 'the bit when Doc gasps as the model of the DeLorean sets light to his workshop. It's perfect' (participant #38). As with the elements of excessive spectacle found in cult musicals, the heightened, exuberant cult performance of Christopher Lloyd clearly contributes to the sustained and passionate following which *Back to the Future* has cultivated.

However, the majority of the participants in the Aberystwyth survey who discuss the element of performance focus specifically on the partnership of Fox and Lloyd. One respondent states that her reason for re-watching the film was because 'it's a classic with good actors (Christopher Lloyd and Michael J. Fox)' (participant #23). Another explains his attraction to repeat viewings as 'the story. The soundtrack. The performances, Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd' (participant #81). The partnered performances of Fox and Lloyd (Marty and Doc) are mentioned by 41.6% of participants in response to Questions Three and Four, and are clearly central to audiences' enjoyment of the text. This is a significant finding, in that whereas the majority of existing academic analyses focuses on the relationship between Marty and Lorraine (Fox and Thompson), the findings of this project indicate that the pairing of Fox and Lloyd is far more appealing and important one for Aberystwyth audiences of the film.¹⁴

This finding is also reflected in a range of fan discussions surrounding Fox and Lloyd that can be found online. For example, a review of the film published on the mainstream website *Amazon.co.uk* states that 'the *Back to the Future* movies are possibly the most enjoyable movies ever made, every instalment is clever, exciting and hilarious. Michael J. Fox and Christopher Lloyd are a perfect pairing and are one of the best on screen double acts ever' (Smith 2002). Fan appreciation for the film is also expressed through the many *YouTube* compilations of clips that pay homage to the trilogy; several of these focus specifically on the pairing of Marty and Doc (Orypeci 2011) and typically incorporate other elements of eighties nostalgia, such as pop songs from the era. Fan fiction written about the characters from the films also tends to focus primarily on the characters of Marty and Doc. The '*Back to the Future* Fanfix Page' provides many examples that develop the partnership between the characters in a range of different historical contexts. These include stories such as 'Tremors in Time' (in which Marty and Doc get caught in the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco) and 'Partners in Time?' (in which Marty and Doc nearly destroy their friendship, but patch things up during the Salem Witch Trials) (Heley 1996-2012). A second, niche area of *Back to the Future* fan fiction takes the form of slash fiction devoted to the Marty/Doc relationship, for example, in the homoerotic story 'Building Coincidence' (Lithrael 2010). This queer reading of their relationship is also explored in the *YouTube* video 'Brokeback to the Future' (Orangeohm, 2006). Francesca Coppa has noted that 'male buddy' partnerships

have always been attractive to writers of slash fiction, particularly when there is 'additional evidence for a homoerotic interpretation' (2001: 49). Mathijs and Sexton suggest that because slash fiction challenges taste norms and industry practices (such as copyright) it is more likely to develop a cult reputation (2011: 222). While these fan appropriations of *Back to the Future* are neither numerous nor highly visible, their existence points again to a core of devotees and followers who enjoy a specialised, cultist appreciation of the film.

Conclusions

Back to the Future was the highest grossing film of 1985, and it is clear that many of the ways in which the Aberystwyth audience express their appreciation for the film reflect its mainstream status. The star appeal of Michael J. Fox in the leading role, for example, provides a key attraction which drew many of the research participants to re-watch the film again on the big screen. However, the findings of this survey also uncover some very specific and specialised ways in which the film is appreciated by some fans. As with Klinger's survey, the Aberystwyth research participants reveal a particular set of desires and agendas to explain their enduring affection for the film. Firstly, their discussions of the nostalgic value which they attribute to *Back to the Future* reveal two distinctive patterns of response. As a viewing strategy, the significance of nostalgia lies in its ability to enable fans to re-visit a valued and precious period of their own personal history, specifically their cherished childhood experiences of watching the film at home. This viewing strategy accounts for the devotion expressed by many of the research participants in Aberystwyth. Secondly, as a textual quality, nostalgia is associated with the excessive moments of the film, especially those sequences which employ music to create a 'sudden explosion of spectacle' (Conrich: 115). Some of the Aberystwyth audiences' other pleasures, such as the quotability of the dialogue, are closely linked to these pleasures and reinforce the subcultural capital implicit in these readings. The second set of findings, relating to the key performances by Fox and Lloyd, suggest a cultic appreciation for both the excessive, exaggerated performance by Lloyd as Doc Brown, and a niche appropriation of the Fox/Lloyd relationship on fanfic and slash fiction sites. These distinctive readings and cultic pleasures, together with the production of secondary texts and the practice of repeat viewing, arguably reveal an on-going process of cultification taking place in relation to the *Back to the Future*.

Audience research never provides a complete picture of the multiple ways in which people respond to films and other media texts. Instead, it complicates our understanding of these responses and opens up new critical perspectives on specific film cultures and practices. While limited in its scope, the findings of this small-scale audience survey highlight some of the significant ways in which a young, contemporary audience appreciates and values *Back to the Future* as a cult blockbuster. Mathijs and Sexton argue that there are two ways to measure the cultist reception of a blockbuster film: by studying the prefigurative materials available before the film's release, and by observing 'specially staged activities such as conventions or fan gatherings' that occur years later (2011: 222). The

findings of this research project illustrate the value of audience research as a means to investigate the complex and varied pleasures which these specially staged activities and screenings can generate. Furthermore, in examining a snapshot of audience interpretations of the textual pleasures which the film offers, this article offers a provisional and nuanced 'middle ground' reading of cult fan responses at one specific moment of *Back to the Future's* on-going reception.

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Appendix 1: *Back to the Future* questionnaire

1. When did you first watch *Back to the Future*?

- ☐ At the cinema when it was first released (1985/6) ☐ At the cinema when it was re-released (2010)
- ☐ On television ☐ On video or DVD ☐ Today at the cult screening ☐ Other

2. How many times have you watched *Back to the Future*?

- ☐ Once ☐ 2-5 times ☐ 6-10 times ☐ More than 10 times

3. Is there one part of the film that most sticks in your mind as a favourite sequence? Which sequence is it and why is it your favourite part of the film?

4. If you have seen *Back to the Future* many times, can you explain why you enjoy re-watching it?

Finally, could you tell us a few things about yourself?

(a) Are you: Male ☐ Female ☐

(b) Your age group: Under 18 ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56-65 ☐ Over 65 ☐

(c) Which of the following statements would you say comes closest to the way you would describe yourself?

- ☐ I am a fan of BTTF and own it on video/DVD
- ☐ I enjoy watching BTTF as part of a general nostalgia for 80s films
- ☐ I'm watching BTTF as a cinephile with an interest in all forms of cult cinema
- ☐ I'm watching BTTF with friends/for social reasons

Notes:

¹ Line spoken by Marty McFly whilst watching an episode of *The Honeymooners* with his mother's family in 1955 (*Back to the Future*, 1985).

² 11.2% of research respondents described the film as a "classic", and it regularly features in lists compiled by film magazines and websites, for example, *Empire* magazine ranks it at no. 23 in their 'Greatest Movies of All Time' list.

³ Although this article focuses primarily on the first film in the trilogy, references are made to the second and third films in the franchise, as well as ancillary materials/paratexts such as posters.

⁴ Marty McFly speaking to Doc Brown in 1955 (*Back to the Future*, 1985).

⁵ Daniel Marcus adopts an oppositional reading on the use of nostalgia in the film to that of Prince and Sobchack. He argues that, in *Back to the Future*, fifties America is not presented in an idyllic way, but rather in terms of its technological and cultural deficiencies (2004: 107).

⁶ The other films included in the Aberystwyth cult film club programme (2011-12) were *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* (Russ Meyer, 1965), *The Princess Bride* (Rob Reiner, 1987), *El Topo* ([Alejandro Jodorowsky](#), 1970), *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932), *Reefer Madness* (Louis J. Gasnier, 1936), *Letter to Brezhnev* (Chris Bernard, 1985), *Oldboy* (Park Chan-wook, 2003) and *The Big Lebowski* (Joel Coen, 1998). The films were selected to encourage a broad and inclusive understanding of the term 'cult' as a category that can include popular films as well as more niche titles.

⁷ Although Mathijs and Sexton propose that cult cinema is 'primordially known through its reception' (2011:13), I argue that in placing equal emphasis on 'receptions and debates' and 'themes and genres,' *Cult Cinema* also adopts a 'middle ground' that draws together and explores audience-based and text-based understandings of cult in conjunction with each another.

⁸ In the same way that it is difficult to define the term cult cinema, "mainstream" is also a problematic category in that it encompasses a broad range of texts, practices and values, and its

meaning fluctuates according to the context in which it is being used; the term is employed throughout this article with this acknowledgement.

⁹ Mathijs and Sexton note that 'many of the contributors to Cineaste's 2008 symposium on cult cinema expressed this concern' (2011: 223).

¹⁰ Many thanks to Lisa Richards for providing me with a written summary of the introduction she gave at the Aberystwyth screening of the film.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Klinger's survey was of repeat viewings of films by students *in the home*, and that this domestic context would produce significantly different results to the study of a film audience at a cinema screening.

¹² This reading of the data was corroborated by an employee at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, who concurred that 'on average our audiences have a much wider age spread than that, and that one age group doesn't particularly dominate' (Amery 2012).

¹³ This is most clearly demonstrated on the principal website associated with the film, <http://www.bttf.com/> which was founded by a fan, Stephen Clark, and has been awarded 'official' status by Universal Studios. The interest in memorabilia and merchandise is also apparent on other fan websites, such as <http://www.fanpop.com/spots/back-to-the-future>.

¹⁴ The official posters for the second and third parts of the trilogy include the character of Doc Brown standing behind Marty McFly, suggesting that their partnership is more central to the storyline of the sequels than it was in the first film.